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RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 2251
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: RUMORS OF AN IMMINENT EARTHQUAKE SHAKE THE COUNTRY

CLASSIFIED BY AMB. JON R. PURNELL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D).

11. (U) Rumors of an imminent earthquake spread throughout Tashkent and into the provinces of Uzbekistan late afternoon on February 9, causing panic among the population. The Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES) confirmed for the Embassy that it had in no way predicted an earthquake. An Institute of Seismology official told us the same. However, same Embassy contacts who had themselves phoned the MES said that they were told that the Ministry had known for the last few weeks that an earthquake on the Richter scale of 5-9 had been predicted to happen before February 10. With the final day of the period coming to an end, MES officials were reportedly contacting schools in Tashkent and requesting that students be picked up and taken home.

12. (U) As schools were notified, word spread quickly throughout the city and the rumor mill shifted into high gear. By late afternoon, the mobile phone systems reached their limits and making a phone call became almost impossible. As families began to return to their homes, those in apartment buildings opted to wait out the imminent earthquake in the courtyard with all of their neighbors. By early evening, courtyards were filled with tenants afraid to return to their apartments for fear of the predicted disaster. By this time, the MES was reportedly answering their phones with QNO, there is not going to be an earthquakeQ. It was only after several hours of waiting that families slowly returned to their homes. According to Embassy contacts in the provinces, word of the predicted disaster spread by way of relatives and friends of those living in Tashkent. There were reports of families waiting outside of their apartment buildings until as late as midnight.

13. (C) Comment: There are a number of theories to explain the mass hysteria and confusion that spread throughout the country. The fact that in April the country will mark the 40th anniversary of the destructive 1966 earthquake is likely playing a role. Conspiracy theorists believe that this was a diversionary tactic started by the GOU to cover up a different operation or event. Others feel that this was a test to determine how quickly news of a major event would travel. Whatever the reason, people deprived of reliable information and used to living on rumor reacted as though the reports were true.

PURNELL